

The Art of Waiting:

A reflection upon what it means to “Wait for the Lord”

Isaiah 40:21-31
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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On a sliding scale from “I’m totally chilled out” to “I just want to scream”, how would you rate your general level of patience? You probably already know how to rate those closest to you. Now apply that scale specifically to **how patient you are when having to wait**. That, of course, may depend upon the circumstance, or just your mood and mental health at any given point in time.

For the most part, however, most of us simply aren’t very good at waiting. In our culture of almost instant access, having to wait for just about anything can often lead to frustration, anxiousness, perhaps even anger. That can apply to being stuck waiting in the slowest lane at a store, or at the airport, or in slow traffic. Many sometimes respond not just with impatience, but with rage. Patience may also take a toll when waiting on a slow computer, or for someone to instantly respond back to a text.

In those kinds of situations, it’s usually helpful to **take a deep breath and remind ourselves to be grateful** that we have stores to shop in, large metal objects that fly through the air, cars to drive and roads to drive them on (even if in a state of constant or needed repair). And think of the gratitude for finances to make purchases, including computers and smart phones.

And then there are those of us who simply get impatient that we don’t have more patience. Remember what it was like to wait for the worst of the pandemic to subside, to meet again in person with friends and family, to worship and fellowship together here at the church? Some situations, of course, are much more serious than having to wait in a slow line. After all, most of us can spend that time on our phones checking emails or playing a game. Have you ever been in the position when you’ve had to wait for a serious diagnosis, or healing and recovery after surgery, or a call from a potential new employer while unemployed?

Yes, waiting can be difficult on many levels. And being *told* to wait can sometimes become problematic. For instance, many *supporters* of the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. told him to wait, because the time just wasn’t right in the country for him to march for equality. Hence his profound declaration, “Justice delayed is justice denied.” So **sometimes, especially when it comes to social justice issues, a dose of impatience at the status quo can be a good thing in that it can prod us to take action – to just do it.** Perhaps we can all reflect a bit more on that during this Black History Month.

What, then, are we to do with the words of the **Old Testament Hebrew prophet in Isaiah 40:31**, “**but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength**”? Have you ever been told while waiting for something to happen or change in your life that it just isn’t in God’s timing, or to be patient because it’s God’s way of helping you build character? I have been told that in years past, especially after losing my career as a petroleum

geologist in the oil industry crash in the mid 1980s. I remember one of my responses when I emphatically stated, "I have enough character now, thank you very much!"

That is why, over the years of experiencing life, I am now among many that have developed a **theological issue with the phrase, "wait for the Lord."** And that issue has everything to do with how one understands the nature and character of that which we name God. If you haven't thought about it before, **the statement "wait for the Lord" presupposes a belief in a God that constantly works behind the scenes to guide (perhaps even to control, intervene, or at least allow) all of life to unfold according to God's divine plan and timing. There's a growing number of Christians in our day and age, however, that no longer believe that the nature and character of God involves intervening in the created order of life in such a specific and controlling fashion.**

But let's look at this in the context of our Old Testament biblical passage. Writing during the time of the **Babylonian Exile**, the Hebrew people were waiting to be released from their captivity so they could return home to Jerusalem. It's understandable, then, that the ancient prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, provides a word of encouragement and hope during their time of waiting. **They must learn to be patient and trusting as they wait for God to act.**

The challenge many of us face with the line of theological thinking that supports an understanding that all things are part of God's sovereign and providential timing, is that **it forces us into a position of making judgment calls of why God seems to intervene at some points in life and not in others, or in other people's lives and not in ours.**

Speaking personally, yet as a pastor and preacher, I no longer believe in the simple platitude that is often given as a response to those who wait, "God's ways simply aren't our ways," or, as is the answer in this biblical passage, "It's all in God's timing, so just wait." Notice that both of those ways of thinking rely on the understanding of a God "out there" somewhere who has such control over the universe that everything is either pre-determined, or at least directed by a God who intervenes in our lives in specific ways.

A potentially harmful result in that belief is **if a person doesn't find their strength renewed, or have wings like eagles, or can run without getting weary, then it must be God's doing because it's obviously not within God's timing. Or worse, we blame ourselves, thinking that we don't have enough faith, haven't prayed the right prayer, or haven't done whatever we think we need to do in life so that God will make needed circumstances or transformation come to pass. Also, if all we have to do is wait, then it can lead to doing nothing for ourselves or others in the present.**

Saying all that, it's not hard to see why the ancient Hebrew people needed to believe in such an interventionist God. And how many of us now are waiting for some kind of Divine intervention to stop the genocide in the Gaza Strip and the terrorist killings of Hamas, or the unjustified war inflicted on Ukraine by Russia, or any number of other troubled spots in the world. That includes working on a serious, bipartisan immigration proposal to deal with the severe border issue problems. And what about the countless millions of God's children waiting for help to simply survive, who live below a level of subsistence in poverty and starvation across the globe. How effective is it to just say to them, "Wait for the Lord"? **Yes, we have much for which we are waiting, on a personal, communal, and global scale.**

Let's go back, then, and take a closer look at the theology the prophet suggests. In beautifully poetic language, the prophet reminds those in exile that God is the creator of all that is, who "sits above the circle of the earth" (Isaiah 40:22). In the

prophet's understanding, there is a word of hope only when they grasp God's awesome power and their powerlessness. Such thinking has done wonders for many in programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, understanding that recovery involves recognizing the need for help from a Higher Power than themselves. I can affirm that. For the Hebrews in Exile, to cling to hope in such a time of despair and crisis begins with remembering the remarkable works of God in Israel's history. What about remembering the remarkable works of God in your and my, and our, history? For the exiles, captivity in Babylon was a painful reality. They were forced from their homes, scattered as the temple in Jerusalem was reduced to rubble, and became forced refugees from the very land that held promise and their very identity. No wonder they became impatient, weary, and had grown faint.

In the ancient world, they could have concluded that the gods of Babylon were more powerful than their God, Yahweh. But their conclusion, based on the belief that there is only one God, was that **they were simply disregarded or being punished by the One who "sits above the circle of the earth"**. With God located at this remote and powerful distance, we too may conclude that God is only **transcendent** – beyond all of us up there in the sky somewhere. But the prophet also reminds us that God exists not just "out there," but also close to us, that God is **immanent**.

As Isaiah recites earlier in chapter 40, **the God who sits above the circle of the earth is, at the very same time, the Shepherd who gently claims, gathers, names, and carries us** (vv. 10-11). The scriptures are filled with this dual understanding that God is both transcendent – beyond us, and immanent – with us. The primarily theological question, however, is just how does that work? Admittedly, that may be the wrong question, one that can only be answered with, "It's just a divine Mystery." But it's a question that hounds many of us on the progressive side of the theological spectrum.

Does the theological concept of God's sovereignty (God's power and control over the entire universe) mean that we should simply wait because God has it all under control, that everything happens for a reason (no matter how tragic), and that it's all simply a matter of God's will and timing? I, and I suspect many of you, though once fervently believing that, am no longer quite so certain. Others, however, may find it hard to let go of that belief.

And yet, there is much good news to find in this poetry in the Book of Isaiah. The good news is that there is a way for the exhausted, faint, powerless, and weary to renew their strength, to mount up with wings like eagles, to run without growing weary, and to walk without fainting. The way suggested by the poet, is to *wait* for the Creator who names and gathers the lambs and does not faint or grow weary in doing so. Yet again, many of us ponder and question if God really is in charge of the universe in that kind of intervening and controlling way.

Yes, I realize that most church-going Christians still consider it **heresy to even question the understanding of an all-powerful, omnipotent, sovereign God** – if by sovereignty one means absolute control over all that happens in the universe. **The result of so many communities of faith continuing to insist on this belief as the one and only absolute truth about God is that a continuing number of faithful Christians have simply left the church altogether, turning their back on organized religion. Unfortunately, most do not search for a new potentially affirming community of faith.** Therefore, it is our hope, vision, mission and ministry here at College Hill to **let those who are disheartened, disillusioned, and perhaps even damaged by that theological understanding of God**

know that we exist and are a safe and healing space where such questioning is welcome, even affirmed.

But let me be clear, that doesn't mean that God, as understood as the Sacred Presence that dwells beyond, among, and within you and all of creation, doesn't provide us with strength and power, with renewal for our bodies, minds, and spirits. Many of us are just not so absolute anymore in how that all works. And being told to simply wait for God is not the complete solution.

These are some of my theological questions and issues about the nature and character of God. **What are your questions? We are here to wrestle with all that together!**

Amen.